E 353
.1
.M37 M5
Copy 1

Class E353
Book .M37M5

With the respects of
Wm Pace

MEMOIR

OF

Colonel WILLIAM McREE, U. S. E.

533
.M22

MEMOIR

OF

Colonel WILLIAM McREE, U. S. E.

Library of Congress
1931
City of Washington

Wilmington
1834

E353
.M37M15

To the citizens of Wilmington, North Carolina, distinguished now for their enterprise, hospitality and refinement, as in the days of the Revolution for their Patriotism, this meagre notice of a native of their town, is respectfully inscribed.

MEMOIR.

It is only in extraordinary crises that very modest men, however great their capacity, are sought after to fill high stations. Thus it happened, that the subject of this sketch, in the maturity of his wisdom and manhood, during the existence of a profound peace, was lost to the public eye.

Few men have been so eminently distinguished in their profession, and yet so little known to the mass of their countrymen. In a time of peril and disaster, when the weak and ignorant shrink from responsibility, he would have been elevated to the post of danger.—No position would he have accepted with so much alacrity and pride, for while he spurned the temptations of avarice and ordinary ambition, his lofty aspirations panted for a theatre of action, commensurate with his wishes and great talents. He exhibited in his life an unusual spectacle—extensive acquirements, profound knowledge, ardent patriotism, combined with modesty so singularly rare. Winning the distinguished regard, and exciting the warm admiration of all within the sphere of his acquaintance, he seemed to withdraw with morbid sensibility from general notoriety. Ready at any moment to risk his life for the people that he loved, he relied for public station solely on his zeal, his integrity, and his merit; willing to serve when he could be useful, he was never prepared, with cap in hand, to crave favor or office, for the sake of its emolument or distinction. He held the demagogue in contempt, and trampled with scorn upon the *Art* of winning popular applause.

Had he been a native of Virginia or South Carolina, his name would be emblazoned on the pages of their history; but North Carolina, though she seldom fails to blush for the disgrace of a son, is not often known to glory in his achievements or to vaunt his renown. Sober, steady, and grave in character, as she avoids the excitability of her neighbors, which sometimes runs into turbuleuce and riot, so is she without their generous and enthusiastic approval, of those who confer honor upon their native soil. A strong feeling of State-pride, actuates in his taskthe writer of this notice of a man of worth and genius. "The fame of a State is the aggregate fame of its citizens."

William McRee was born in the town of Wilmington, N. C., the 13th day of December, in the year 1787. He was the son of Major Griffith John McRee, and Ann Fergus. The father of Col. McRee, the child of an Irish emigrant, was a native of the State of

South Carolina. In early youth he removed to North Carolina and made it his home for life. He was a cavalry officer in the "Continental Line," during the war of the Revolution. At the close of that great struggle, so productive of noble results, he was a lineal Major and a Col. by Brevet. He died October the 3d, 1801, at the age of 48.

Ann Fergus, the wife of Major McRee, was the daughter of John Fergus, a native of North Carolina, of Scotch extraction. He was a graduate of the Medical College at Edinburg, and afterwards a surgeon in General Braddock's army. His commission is still in the possession of the McRee family. The mother of Col. McRee died at an advanced age in the Fall of 1842, after having survived all of her own race and name upon the Cape-Fear. She suffered many trials in her day, but when the arrow of Death was sped, she received it standing erect in the Christian's hope, like the oak in winter, with its leaves and fruit strewed around its base, still pointing upward to the skies.

William McRee, at the age of thirteen, about the year 1800, was at Pittsborough, N. C., under the care of Mr. Bingham, an admirable instructor of youth, enjoying at that period, no little celebrity in his vocation. He must have made good progress in his studies, and must have earned the regard and approval of his teacher, for I extract from a letter, addressed him by his father, in 1801 :—"Mr. Bingham's report of your conduct gives us great satisfaction, and I flatter myself that you will continue to prove that you are worthy of his esteem and our affection." Here were undoubtedly sown, in a fertile soil, those seeds of knowledge, that were destined in after years to attract by the luxuriance of their growth, and the beauty and excellence of their fruit. At this early age he was remarkable for a decision of character, a tenacity of purpose, and habit of investigation and analysis, far beyond his classmates, indicating an unusual maturity. His inquisitive mind, grappling with all subjects, was not even awed by the majesty of our holy and beneficent Religion; but discussed, and examined its authenticity and claims, with singular, but culpable astuteness. His father was alarmed by the freedom and temerity of his opinions on this sacred subject, to such a degree, that he wrote him at this time a very earnest letter, in which he tells his son that though he excel in scholarship, if his heart be unchastened by the pure influence of religion, his acquirements are worthless, and concludes: "These observations, I hope, by being duly appreciated by you, will tend to relieve me from the painful suspense, which the doubtful bias of your mind for some time past has kept me under."

How long he remained under the charge of Mr. Bingham does not appear; but soon after the death of Major McRee, the limited means of his widow constrained her to withdraw her son from school. Few persons can appreciate the distress of the mother, and the disap-

pointment of the orphan at this painful period of their history.

William, after his return, remained at home, under his parent's humble roof, and endeavored, without success, to aid her in the support of a large and helpless family, by procuring some reputable employment. Even in the midst of no ordinary discouragement, the ardent boy never yielded to despondency, but still contrived to feed his love of learning, and applied himself assiduously to his books.—He mocked Despair, and looked to a future that brightened with all the enchantment that Fancy could bestow.

In the year 1803 Colonel Williams, the "late venerated Chief of Engineers," accidentally visited Wilmington. He inquired for the family of Major McRee, who had been in former days his friend.—Discovering in William a vigorous mind, budding with promise, the "Father of West Point" prevailed upon Mrs. McRee to place her son under his charge. It was impossible to prepare the young man immediately, for his departure, but the kind-hearted soldier remained until his mother had furnished his trunk. Nor did his generosity cease here; he procured for him a Cadet's warrant. William left Wilmington with a purse as light as his heart, carrying nothing away with him but his mother's blessing, and the lessons of virtue she had instilled into his mind. The mother's prayer, as her eyes filled with tears for the success of her child, ascended to Heaven, and was answered by the God of the destitute. She never had to blush for her son from the day that he left her until the grave claimed its victim.

The Warrant of William McRee, as a Cadet in the Regiment of Artillerists at West Point, bears date April the 14th 1803. On the 11th day of June 1805 he was appointed a Cadet in the Corps of Engineers. In after years his fame shed no little lustre upon this Institution. This useful Academy has always had many violent opponents, and its existence has often been in jeopardy. At these seasons of threatening storms, the services of Col. McRee and her other graduates, by sustaining the sinking popularity of their "Alma Mater," have discharged, in some degree, their debt of gratitude to this noble Seminary. Of his connection with this school, it was afterward, in an excellent paper in vindication of its utility from the attack of its foes, finely said:

"For many years after its establishment the Military Academy was scarcely known beyond the narrow limits of its own circle. Fortunately the occasion was not distant which was destined to rouse the energies of the nation, and call into active exercise the latent benefits of the Institution. The names of Wood, McRee, Douglas, and a host of youthful warriors, who with the valor, skill, and confidence of hardy veterans, sprung at once from the peaceful lap of science to the rude and stormy field of war, soon rung with re-echoed sound, to the remotest corner of an admiring country. They were pupils of

the Military Academy. Then first did West Point become an object of eager inquiry. Fathers were anxious to give their sons such an opportunity of rising to renown; and the sons themselves felt the glow of youthful desire kindle in their bosoms, to emulate the noble example before them."*

In the winter of 1807 he had command of the Engineer Department at Charleston, S. C. in the absence of his senior, Macomb.— He was promoted to the rank of Captain in the Corps of Engineers, June 11th, 1808. At the commencement of the late War with Great Britain he had attained a Majority in his Corps, receiving his new rank July 31st, 1812, at the very early age of twenty-four. This war with a gigantic Power, that was trampling upon the Eagles of Napoleon, stimulated his fine talents, and afforded an ample field for their display. It was not long after the first shot had been fired before the ambition of the young soldier was gratified by the applause of those best qualified to appreciate his merit, the officers of the Army. "He was usefully employed at various points of the Union between Georgia and Canada, under Generals Brown, Hampton, and Izard, in the North, and Pinkney in the South."†

In 1812, then, he must have been in the South, for during the remainder of the contest he was at the Frontier Lines, at the North. In 1813 Major McRee was attached to the right wing of the United States Army, under the command of Generals Hampton and Izard, as Chief Engineer, the present Col. Thayer, U. S. E., acting as his assistant. It is, no doubt, fresh in the recollection of every American reader, that an invasion of Canada was projected by Government, and attempted in this year. The whole Army was under the command of General Wilkinson, who moved down the St. Lawrence on the left, while Hampton, to whom was intrusted the right wing, descended the Chateaugay river. The aim of the expedition was a combined attack on the city of Montreal. Much hard fighting occurred, highly creditable to our new levies, but the campaign failed, as is generally thought and believed, in consequence of ignorance and incompetency on the part of the Commanders; this was certainly the case as regards Hampton and Izard. There is no reason for questioning the patriotism and courage of these gentlemen. Their elevation was because of their age, and some little reputation gained in the partisan warfare of the Revolution. Who could, with reason, expect officers of so little experience, and so imperfect an education in the profes-

* An article on West Point, "communicated by a distinguished gentleman," Niles' Register, vol. 9, page 17.

† Letter from Gen. Joseph Swift, of New York, formerly Chief of the Engineer Corps, a distinguished gentleman, the bosom friend of Col. McRee, to whose kindness the author of this notice is much indebted for assistance in compiling this memoir.

sion of arms, to conduct troops successfully on the fields of modern strife? Major McRee, in addition to the duties of an Engineer, had, while with Hampton, charge of the Artillery. The march of General Hampton, in pursuance of the plan of operations agreed upon, was finally arrested by the severe action at Chateaugay—Four Corners. "This though a failure on our part was less so than it would have been, but for the prompt and energetic action of Col. McRee."*

In the actions in 1814, in the neighborhood of the Falls of Niagara, Major McRee greatly distinguished himself, under the command of General Jacob Brown, being the constant companion and adviser of that meritorious officer. On the 3d of July the American Army crossed over into Canada; on the 4th some hard-fighting occurred at Street's Creek; on the 5th the well-contested battle of Chippewa took place. "The result of this first regular pitched battle furnished convincing proof, that nothing but discipline was wanting to give our soldiers on land the same excellence which our seamen had discovered on the ocean. The battle was fought with great judgment and coolness on both sides, and its result, considering the numbers engaged, was exceedingly sanguinary. The total loss of the British, under General Riall, was five hundred and five; the loss on the side of the Americans amounted to three hundred and thirty-eight."†—After this defeat Lt. Gen. Drummond made extraordinary efforts to reinforce Gen. Riall, and soon appeared in person on the theatre of strife, with his numerous recruits. At four o'clock in the afternoon of the 25th, occurred the battle of the Falls of Niagara, indifferently known by this name, and that of Lundy's Lane, and Bridgewater. It was on this field that Col. Miller made his gallant charge on an eminence occupied by the enemy's artillery, and carried the key to their position, gaining for himself universal applause. The British were eventually driven in disgrace from their lines. The British force engaged was little short of five thousand men, of whom twelve hundred were militia and five hundred Indians; being nearly a third greater than that of the Americans. The British loss was in all eight hundred and seventy men; the American, eight hundred and fifty-one.

It is not my purpose to speak of the military ability and intrepidity of Brown, Scott, Gaines, Jesup, and Ripley, nor can I add to or detract from their fame. I only design to show the part that Major McRee played on these occasions, that appeal so strongly to our national pride, so pleasing and so gratifying to every lover of his country. Major General Brown in his report to the Hon. John Armstrong, Secretary of War, dated Buffalo, August, 1814, in allusion to the battle of the Falls of Niagara, says: "The engineers Majors McRee

* Letter from General Swift.

† History of the late War by H. M. Brackenridge.

and Wood, were greatly distinguished on this day, and their high military talents exerted with great effect; they were much under my eye, and near my person, and to their assistance a great deal is fairly to be ascribed; I most earnestly recommend them, as worthy of the highest trust and confidence."* General Joseph Swift, of New York, writes me, "General Brown has often said to me that he esteemed Col. McRee to be the most accomplished military man in the Army, and that he (Gen. B.) was greatly indebted to his counsel, and to his undaunted courage for success." Mr. Benjamin F. Butler,† thus refers to the battle of the Falls, or Bridgewater, in an address delivered at West Point in 1839, before the Dialectic Society: "Not to speak of others, it was McRee, an 'eleve' of this Academy, who, on the field of Bridgewater, suggested the expediency of that perilous, but well-timed order, whose successful execution turned the tide of battle, and won for the modest Miller an imperishable wreath; and to him, and to Wood, another son of this Institution, who fell at the head of his column in the Sortie from Fort Erie, and whose worth has been commemorated by his commander, in the monument that graces yonder plain, may justly be ascribed much of the glory of that memorable campaign."

The allusion of Mr. Butler to the *charge* at Bridgewater, must have been founded on high authority, or the remark would not have been hazarded in a public address at the Military Academy. I presume he derived his information from some of the heroes of that glorious day. As yet we have no history of the late War worthy of the name. The contemporary officers are, in its absence, the highest authority. I have now before me the following communication from the War Department to Major McRee.

War Department, August 19, 1814.

Sir:—I have the honor to transmit herewith a Brevet commission as Lieutenant Colonel in the Army of the United States, which the President has been pleased to confer upon you as a particular evidence of his approbation of your conduct in the battle of the 25th of July last, near the Falls of the river Nagara.

Accept, sir, the assurance of

My very great respect,

J. ARMSTRONG.

Lt. Col. William McRee.

By this commission he was to rank as Lt. Col. by Brevet from the 25th of July 1814.

"Gen. Brown, having been wounded in the battle of Niagara, ordered Gen. Ripley to take command in his stead. Gen. Ripley,

* Brannan's Military and Naval letters.

† Late Attorney General U. S.

unable to make a stand against the superior force of the British, retreated to Fort Erie, and anticipating their approach, immediately set about extending its defences." Major McRee was Chief Engineer, and the lamented Wood his assistant. Upon these two officers, of course devolved the great work of fortifying their position, with what success the sequel will show. "The enemy, notwithstanding their pretended victory, did not think proper to follow up the Americans, until they had been re-inforced by General De Watteville, with one thousand men. Their whole force, now amounting to upwards of five thousand men, appeared on the 3d of August, before a fortification which a few days previously had been considered untenable, and commenced the erection of regular intrenchments. The besieged, at the same time, labored incessantly to complete their arrangements for defence. The position which the American Army had taken, for the purpose of maintaining itself against so great a superiority, possessed few natural advantages; and the work called Fort Erie was little more than a small unfinished redoubt. Situated about one hundred yards from the lake shore at its nearest angle, and on a plain of about fifteen feet elevation, this Fort could be considered as nothing more than the strongest point of a fortified camp. A line of works was yet to be constructed in front, and on the right and left to the lake; the rear on the shore being left open. The fort itself probably did not occupy more than a sixth of the space occupied by the line of defences, and the remainder could not be otherwise than hastily constructed."* The approaches of the British were slow and cautious. The American troops in number were under twenty-five hundred. On the night of the 14th of August, a little after midnight, commenced the principal "battle of Fort Erie." The enemy assailed the American lines on the right, centre and left at the same time, but, on the morning of the 15th, a little before sunrise, victory declared for the Americans, at an expense to the British of 905 killed, wounded, and missing, while our own loss was but 84. Gen. Gaines, who had superseded Gen. Ripley, shortly after the commencement of the seige, in his official report of this action, thus alludes to Major McRee.

"*Fort Erie, Upper Canada. August* 23, 1814.

"My attention was now called to the right, where our batteries and lines were soon lighted by a most brilliant fire of cannon and musquetry: it announced the approach of the centre and left columns of the enemy, under Cols. Drummond and Scott; the latter was received by the veteran 9th, under the command of Capt. Foster and Capts. Broughton's and Harding's companies of New York and Pennsylvania volunteers, aided by a six pounder, judiciously posted by Major

* "Brackenridge's History of the War," and "Life of General Gaines, condensed from the best authorities by a friend."

McRee, Chief Engineer, who was most active and useful at this point; they were repulsed." Again, in the same report he says:— "To Major McRee, Chief Engineer, the greatest credit is due for the excellent arrangement, and skilful execution of his plans for fortifying, and defending the right, and for his correct and seasonable suggestions to regain the bastion." I make the following extract from a letter written by the same gallant officer, to the Department, August 26th, 1814: "Our position is growing stronger every day by the exertions of Majors McRee and Wood, and the officers and men generally." On the 28th, Gen. Gaines, being wounded retired to Buffalo. Gen. Brown, having recovered from his wounds, resumed the command on the 2d of September. "Frequent skirmishes occurred, and a cannonade on either side was kept up; but nothing of importance took place until the 17th of September. General Brown, observing that the enemy had just completed a battery, which would open a most destructive fire the next day, planned a sortie, which has been considered a military 'chef d'œuvre,' and which was carried into execution on the day just mentioned. The design of Gen. Brown was to *storm the batteries, destroy the cannon, and roughly handle the brigade on duty, before those in reserve could be brought up.*"* In all of which he succeeded The British force consisted of three brigades of fifteen hundred men each, one of which was in front of the fort, the others being two miles in the rear, in camp. The labour of the enemy for forty-seven days, was destroyed; and, in addition to the loss of their cannon, upwards of a thousand of their men were placed 'hors de combat,' of whom three hundred and eighty-five were taken prisoners. The American loss amounted to eighty-three killed, two hundred and sixteen wounded, and a like number missing.† The enemy immediately raised the siege. With this sortie, its conception, and execution, Col. McRee, is honorably connected by the uncontradicted tradition of the Army, and the recollection of those who participated in the war of 1812—'14. If not its sole author, he is undoubtedly entitled to a fair share of the honors of its paternity.— How far does not appear with certainty. General Swift, of New York writes me, "It was and is generally believed that whatever of success attended the sortie at Fort Erie, much of its plan and its object is due to the counsel of Col. McRee, and Major Wood." General Brown, in his report to the Secretary of War, Sept. 29th 1814, says: "Lt. Col. McRee, and Lt. Col. Wood of the Corps of Engineers, having rendered to this Army, services the most important, I must seize the opportunity of again mentioning them particularly. On every trying occasion I have reaped much benefit from their sound and excellent advice. No two officers of their grade could have con-

* Brackenridge. †Official report.

tributed more to the safety and honor of the Army. Wood, brave, generous, and enterprising, died as he had lived, without a feeling, but for the honor of his country, and the glory of her arms. His name, and example will live to guide the soldier in the path of duty, so long as true heroism is held in estimation. McRee lives to enjoy the approbation of every virtuous and generous mind, and to receive the reward due to his services and high military talents." Soon after this, the following note was addressed to Col. McRee.

ADJUTANT AND INSPECTOR GENERALS OFFICE,
30th November, 1814.

SIR:—I have the honor to enclose to you, the expression of the favorable opinion entertained by the President and Secretary of War, of your gallantry and military character, during the last campaign, with the left Division of the Northern Army.

I hope you will do me the favor to accept assurances of my individual respect and regard.

D. PARKER, Adj't & Insp'r Gen'l.

Col. Wm. McRee.

With this note Col. McRee received his Brevet commission as Colonel, to take rank from the 15th day of August, 1814.

British historians labor in vain to prove that the War on the Frontier was only a War of skirmishes. It is painful to them to dwell upon their mortifying defeats. The troops beaten by the Americans were the finest in the world. It is true that a part of them were undisciplined savages, and raw militia, but a large portion of them were veterans, that had formed under the eagle eye of Wellington, whose bayonets had glittered under the Peninsula sun, before whose strength the standards of Massena and Soult had receded, and at whose touch the hosts of France had melted, like snow at the approach of Spring.*

When we reflect upon the triumphs of Chippewa, Lundy's Lane, the defence of Fort Erie, and the subsequent victory at New Orleans, with such opponents, and such a disparity of forces, not only in quality but in numbers, well may we kindle with exultation. No man at the close of this War, enjoyed in our country so distinguished a military reputation as Col. McRee. "The annals of the

* The War between the English and French terminated by the capture of Paris, March 29th 1814.—*Alison's History of Europe, chap. LXXV, p.* 367.—*Vide*, Sir Walter Scott's Life of Napoleon, vol. 3, appendix No. 8, p. XLVI.—In speaking of the battle of Waterloo. Capt. John W. Pringle, R. E., remarks: "The British troops, however. were not composed of our best regiments, at least our infantry, nor equal to that army which had been in the preceding year in the South of France. Many of the most efficient regiments had been sent to America; first a brigade from Bordeaux to Washington; another to Canada; and afterwards a force from Portsmouth to New Orleans."

Frontier War, at Niagara, show that to McRee's military genius and valor, Gen. Brown, with just magnanimity, ascribed much of the best success of the Army."* Gen. Winfield Scott, the present Commander-in-Chief of the U. S. Army, testifies to the fame of Col. McRee with a magnanimity that adds a fresh leaf to the laurels his gallantry has so well earned upon the field of battle. In a letter to me, dated Washington, May 31st, 1843, he writes: "With the late Col. McRee, I became acquainted in 1814, when we served together in the memorable campaign of the Niagara, and I met him occasionally after the peace, down to near the time of his lamented death. In haste I can now only say, that in my opinion, and, perhaps, in that of all the army, he combined more of genius and military science, with high courage, than any other officer who participated in the war o 1812. I know that this was at least a very general opinion. If the treaty of peace had not prevented, he would, as I also know, have been made a general officer in 1815, and I am confident that he would, in the field, have illustrated the highest grade." As a soldier in the field, Col. McRee was remarkable for his energy, spirit, power of combination, knowledge of details, and profound science. To his ability, all the gallant officers, who availed themselves of his aid, testify, with that generosity, which is ever the characteristic of the high-toned gentleman. None have been envious of his reputation, none have sought to detract from his merit; all have claimed him, with pride, as the ornament of the Service. "Peace found the virtuous and modest McRee, rewarded with brevets" and commendation.

In the year following, the general Government, desirous of elevating the standard of knowledge in the Army, sent Col. McRee on a mission to Europe, and associated Col. Thayer with him. His instructions bear date 20th of April, 1815. He was ordered to embark on board the squadron about to sail to the Mediterranean, and when his services should be no longer required with the squadron, to proceed to the Continent, to examine the military schools, work-shops, canals, arsenals, fortifications, &c. He was provided with funds for the collection of books, maps, and instruments. To defray extra expenses, he was allowed double rations and the pay and emoluments of his Brevet rank. The important duty committed to him, he discharged to the satisfaction of the Government, bringing back with him all the valuable records of European military science and experience for the use of the Military Academy. On his return "as a member of the board of Engineers, appointed at the end of the war to determine upon sites and to lay down a system of fortification for national defence, Col McRee was regarded by the Executive and the Army as the master-spirit, notwithstanding his association, in those

* General Joseph Swift, of New York.

great labors of the mind, with a distinguished foreign General, the nominal head of the Board. There is not the least doubt on this subject in the mind of any contemporary officer."* In 1819, as appears from a report of Mr. Calhoun, Secretary of War, to the Chairman of the Committee on Military affairs, Gen. Simon Bernard and Col. McRee prepared for the War Department a paper, entitled "Considerations on the course of instruction necessary for the officers of the different arms of an army." Of this paper Mr. Calhoun remarks: "I respectfully annex as a part of this communication a report from Gen. Bernard and Col. McRee to this department, in which the subject is so fully discussed as to supercede the necessity of any further observations." In allusion to the Report on a system of Fortifications, in the House of Representatives, Mr. Hamilton, chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs, in 1826, remarked: "A general plan for fortifying the country has been reported by three gentlemen, one of whom is a distinguished foreigner, well known and admired in Europe as well as in this country for his great science and ability in his profession, and two other officers, who had received and deserved to wear, imperishable laurels for their public services,—gentlemen knew that he alluded to the Report of General Bernard, Col. McRee, and Col. Totten."† Soon after this, Col. McRee resigned his place in the army, in the latter part of the year 1819. To an inquiry about the cause of his resignation, his friend, Gen. Swift says: "It was because of his disappointment and disgust at the course which the Government pursued in reference to the Corps of Engineers, and especially in reference to the injudicious relation of a foreign officer with that corps." Col. McRee had no cause for personal complaint. He was himself, deservedly, a favorite with the Government, but his 'esprit de corps' was deeply wounded. He maintained that it was contrary to the true policy of the United States to employ Foreigners in its service; that our country contained within its limits, talents ample for all its purposes; and that if science was wanting on the part of its officers, it was the duty of the Government to afford them opportunities of acquiring it. He was therefore indignant at the appointment of General Bernard, though he only expressed his dissatisfaction by giving up his commission. Col. McRee, however opposed to the appointment of General Bernard, always entertained the most friendly feelings towards that officer, and treated him with the most studious politeness. He spoke of his disinclination to the connection of Gen. Bernard with his Corps, to some of his brother officers, but assigned no reason for his resignation, even to his most intimate friends. In explanation of this subject, a sore one to the army at that day, I

* General Winfield Scott, C. C. U. S. Army.

† Gales and Seaton's Register of Debates, vol. 11, 25, 26.

give part of a letter from that eminent statesman, the Hon. John C. Calhoun, then Secretary of War, dated,

Fort Hill, 12*th July*, 1843.

"I had great regard for Col. Wm. McRee. His talents and character were of the highest order. He only lacked opportunity to distinguish himself as a great military chief.

"When General Swift, who was at the head of the Corps of Engineers, received a civil appointment, I was anxious to place Col. McRee in his place, in order to retain him in the Military service.—I knew he contemplated retiring. Col. Armistead, a man of great worth, and for whom I had much respect, was his senior. The step could not be taken with propriety without his assent. I spoke to him without apprizing Col. McRee of my intention. He had the highest admiration for him, and felt the same solicitude, he should continue in the service, that I did. He gave his consent without hesitation, accompanied by declarations alike honorable to Col. McRee, and himself. I communicated what had occurred, with my wish to have Col. McRee placed at the head of the Corps, to President Monroe, who readily agreed to it. He had also a very high opinion of Col. McRee. I made known to him the facts, but so delicate were his feelings, and such his esteem for Col. Armistead, that it was impossible for me to overcome his objections to be placed over him, even with his assent. I know that Mr. Monroe participated in my desire to continue his services in the Corps, and when he had made up his mind to retire, felt every disposition to give him some eligible civil appointment." * * * * *

"He was a member of the Board of Engineers to take into consideration the defence of the country and report on a system of Fortifications, with General Bernard. The latter was not strictly an officer of the Army, but had the pay and emolument of a Brigadier General. His position was anomalous and excited a good deal of discontent in the Army, and the Corps of Engineers particularly; and it was thought by many it was felt by Col. McRee. But he was not the man to make complaints; if he felt, he never expressed any discontent to me; but always spoke highly of the talents and character of General Bernard, as he did, invariably, of Col. McRee to me.—They were both eminently talented and skilful Engineers. I regarded Col. McRee fully equal to the General, and his reports to the Department, when they made separate, will, I think, fully hold me out in the opinion."

Such praise from a man so distinguished for his sagacity and discrimination, as Mr. Calhoun, is no ordinary compliment. The conduct of Col. McRee in this matter must commend itself to every ingenuous mind. His magnanimity, and generosity was only equalled by that which sought his elevation at the price of personal interest.

A short time before the resignation of Col. McRee, he received his Commission as a lineal Lt. Colonel. After his retirement, he seemed to court with eagerness the quiet pleasures of private life, so attractive to one intellectual as he was; and, doubtless, promised himself inexhaustible pleasure, in the society of his books. In this purpose he was further confirmed by his desire to avail himself of his knowledge of the Western country, to make and secure such a selection of land as would advance the interests of those he loved. "His knowledge of the West, was minute. In the Scientific and Literary Magazine, published in New York, twenty-odd years ago, were inserted his remarks on the West, but the notoriety was disagreeable to him, and the publication was arrested at his request."* Soon after this he accepted the appointment of Surveyor General. Gen. Swift says: "He never sought office, in fact he declined many offers of place and persuasion only induced him to accept the office of Surveyor General, in which he found an ungrateful return for faithful and valuable service." He was appointed, under the Act of Congress, of March 3d, 1825, the head of a Board of Commissioners, consisting of himself, and Cols. Talcot and Lee, of the Army, to survey the Western waters, for the purpose of selecting a site for a national armory. He devoted his time, and abilities assiduously, and closely to this service, in his anxiety to discharge his duty, endangering his health, and expending more than the compensation allowed him. At the close of their labors the Board made a voluminous, and scientific report, which has received the highest praise. In connection with this subject, Gen. Swift writes: "How much of the Armory Report, to which you allude, was composed by Col. McRee, I know not, but the military and statesmanlike views which it contains, are so much like his own, that it doubtless owes its chief value to his mind." A short time previous to his demise, he was appointed one of the Commissioners to survey, and run a line of division between the United States and Mexico, which duty, I believe, he performed.

The labors enumerated are but part of the work of Col. McRee in the service of the United States. In the Archives at Washington City are many 'Memoirs" from his pen. He declined more than one opportunity of employment tendered by individual States, but the Nation had claims upon him to which he never turned a deaf ear. He died in the 46th year of his age, from cholera, in May 1833, and was buried at St. Louis, Missouri.

"Some persons entertained impressions that the Col. was im-

---

* General Swift.

The article alluded to above is to be found in the Literary and Scientific Repository and Critical Review, New York, Wiley and Halstead, July 1820.—They were private letters not intended for publication. In the same periodical the Col. published some Strictures on National Affairs.

practicable and cynical—those who best knew him had no such opinion of him; his adherence to his own well considered opinions, in some of which he was peculiar, may have induced the former impression, and deserved sarcasm the latter.

"There is a common idea that men find a Prototype amongst the Ancients, or follow some distinguished Modern. The Col. was as much an original thinker as I have ever known. He studied the Ancients, and Brutus had with him more congenial points of character than Cicero; but he (the Col.) was also an admirer of Cæsar, Napoleon, and Frederick, and yet was he a Republican of enlightened caste—venerating law—knowing the necessity of moral restraint.—Poetry had high charms for him, and he most admired Byron, though he read Young with reverence. I remember also that he was fond of conversing about the Reformation, and the opinions of Father Paul Sarpi."*

Col. McRee was never married. In his early manhood, he was attached to a lady in the South, and succeeded in winning her affection. The match was prevented by some misfortune, in what manner is not known, but certainly through no default on his part.—This attachment, it is believed, gave a slightly melancholy hue to his character in the future. He ever afterward declared that he had no design to marry. His intimacy with ladies was rare, and always in accordance with his uniform delicacy.

"Col. McRee was distinguished by a highly cultivated mind, strong reasoning faculties, and a safe judgment; to which were united the talents of a General and the virtues of benevolence. His society was eagerly coveted; his conversation was most interesting. His retiring modesty and deference to others, made it difficult to draw him forth, but when the growing interest of a topic had excited his attention, his eloquence became alike attractive and instructive. Educated by and for the Nation, at an institution where sectional and personal objects are lost in a patriotic devotion to the whole Union, entire and free, McRee was never known to be a member of any political party."† His political creed was Republican. No vice was ever imputed to him. He was chaste and temperate. "His religious opinions, that were expressed, were what are commonly called *Philosophical.* From early youth his deportment was ever grave and dignified; his personal attachments few, warm, and steady. In personal expenses no gentleman was more economical. His salary was ample, yet he accumulated no fortune, for he had no money-saving talent, and his hand was 'open as day to melting charity.' So little did he treasure up gold that when he retired from the Army he was

* General Swift.

† Obituary notice, furnished I believe by an officer of rank in the Army.

obliged to sell a valuable Library to defray his expenses, and further his views in the West. In person Col. McRee was rather below the ordinary stature; his countenance pale; his nose prominent, straight, and handsome; his forehead high; his eyes a greyish blue, and of very thoughtful expression. The general expression of his features when at rest, was grave, sometimes melancholy. His manner was reserved until he was drawn out in conversation; his humor satirical without acrimony. In dress he was remarkably plain."* Col. McRee resided in St. Louis many years, where his death was universally lamented. He left two brothers still surviving—James F. McRee, M. D., of Wilmington, N. C., and Major Samuel McRee, U. S. A.—A small, but beautiful Fortification, that frowns upon the waters of Pensacola, Florida, indicates the respect of the general Government for his memory.

* General Swift.

APPENDIX.

Gen. Brown "hastened forward with Majors McRee and Wood to reconnoitre the enemy, and select ground for the interposition of the advancing corps. In performing this service the attention of all was speedily attracted by the site given to the British artillery; which, from its greater elevation and other circumstances, gave it a complete command of the field of battle, and drew from the senior engineer (Major McRee,) a decided opinion, that 'to gain the victory, the first thing to be done was to storm the British battery.' The commanding General entirely coinciding in the opinion, hastened to meet the advancing corps, and on doing so, directed Col. Miller to put himself at the head of the 21st regiment, and make the charge."—*Armstrong's notices of the War of* 1812, *vol.* 2, *p.* 92, *in allusion to the Battle of Bridgewater or Lundy's Lane.*

Note 1*st*.—In the annals of the War, the name of Col. McRee is frequently misspelt, generally *McCrea*. There was but one Engineer of this name.

Note 2*d*.—"I thank you most heartily for what you have done for our relief; but what I hear of Gen. Izard's *habits*, *character*, and *intentions*, is so unsatisfactory, that I hope nothing from him. McRee, who is a good judge of Generals, puts him at the very bottom of the list," &c.—*Gen. Brown to Secretary of War*, 31*st August*, 1814—*Armstrong's notices.*

Note 3*d*.—After the Battle of Bridgewater, Gen. Ripley would have retired disgracefully into the United States, had it not been for the strong opposition of McRee and Wood. Their advice was approved by General Brown, who ordered the division to Fort Erie, and Gen. Gaines to take command 'vice' Ripley, and maintain his position on the Canadian soil.—*Armstrong's notices, vol.* 2, *page* 95.

IB Ja '13

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
0 011 783 229 6